

CHAPTER 5

DEALING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Flood risks usually affect large areas or whole groups of people and require solutions of comparable scope. Explanation of these kinds of problems and mitigating actions involve dealing with the community through meetings, workshops and other formats. Sometimes these kinds of risk communications go smoothly but often enough they either become stormy or the local government and public simply lose interest. How things progress depends in part on the nature of the interaction with the community and the public that is planned as part of the risk communication effort.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY INPUT

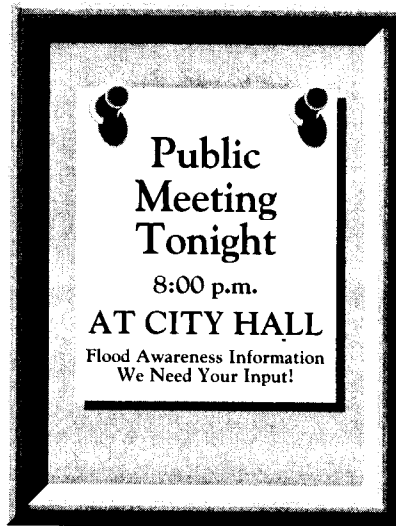
It's important to plan for community input in risk communication efforts for four major reasons:

- People have a right to make decisions about issues that directly affect their lives.

- Involvement in the decision making process

improves the public's understanding of the risk and leads to more appropriate response.

- ☐ Input from the public helps the information provider in identifying factors that are important beyond the bare scientific analysis of the risk and potential responses.
- ☐ A willingness to accept input increases the credibility of the information provider.



MANAGING COMMUNITY INPUT

Successful efforts to obtain community input must consist of more than presenting a plan that has already been worked out and defending against critical comments. Procedures that increase the effectiveness of communications with the community are:

- ☐ Involving the community at the earliest stage possible.

- ☐ Clarifying the use of the input and defining those things that are subject to change as a result of the input and those things that are not.
- ☐ Identifying the different audiences that exist and responding to their special needs for information.
- ☐ Wherever possible, substituting small informal meetings for large meetings or formal hearings.
- ☐ Recognizing that people's feelings are an important aspect of their response to risk and not responding to emotional statements by quoting technical data.
- ☐ Listening to expressions of values and feelings, acknowledging them, and being prepared to describe the values on which the agency's planning is based.

TRUST AND CREDIBILITY

Risk communications almost always require the lay audience to rely on the expertise of the agency providing the information, both with respect to the scientific aspects that are

involved and their interpretation. *"Credibility and trust are not automatic"*

The effort to

explain the flood

risk or project proposal are almost certain to fail unless the agency is viewed as being credible and trustworthy.

Credibility and trust are not automatic. In fact, the opposite is often the case, and the agency initiating the communication effort must overcome a natural resistance to outsiders suggesting what the community should or must do.

Whether or not an agency builds trust depends on a number of factors such as: apparent competence; willingness to invite public involvement and take it seriously; openness; and consideration of community concerns. Trust and credibility can be enhanced by:

- ☐ Identifying those community organizations that do have local trust and credibility and asking for their assistance in explaining the flood risk and proposed project.
- ☐ Explaining agency procedures in the detail necessary to show their logic and describing how the public's input will fit into the procedures.
- ☐ Taking the time to consider what kinds of information different groups may want or need to know, preparing a list of issues and the responses that address them, and furnishing information at the earliest possible time even if no specific requests for it have been made.
- ☐ Only making promises that can be kept and following through on those that are made.
- ☐ If a delay occurs in meeting a commitment, getting back in contact with the person and explaining the reason for the delay.

- ☐ If pressed for a date of some event or decision that can't be controlled, explaining the process and goals rather than guessing at a date that will probably turn out to be wrong.
- ☐ Ensuring all of the appropriate coordination has been done both within the agency and with other agencies and explaining any differences in agency views and recommendations rather than letting them cause confusion.
- ☐ Making every meeting open to the public because closed meetings arouse suspicion and seldom go unnoticed.